THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES

PECULIARITIES OF THE CHIEF LEGISLATIVE BODY OF FRANCE.

THE DIVISION INTO COMMISSIONS AND THEIR REPORTS—THE TRIBUNAL'S VICISSITUDES.

Paris, December 19.

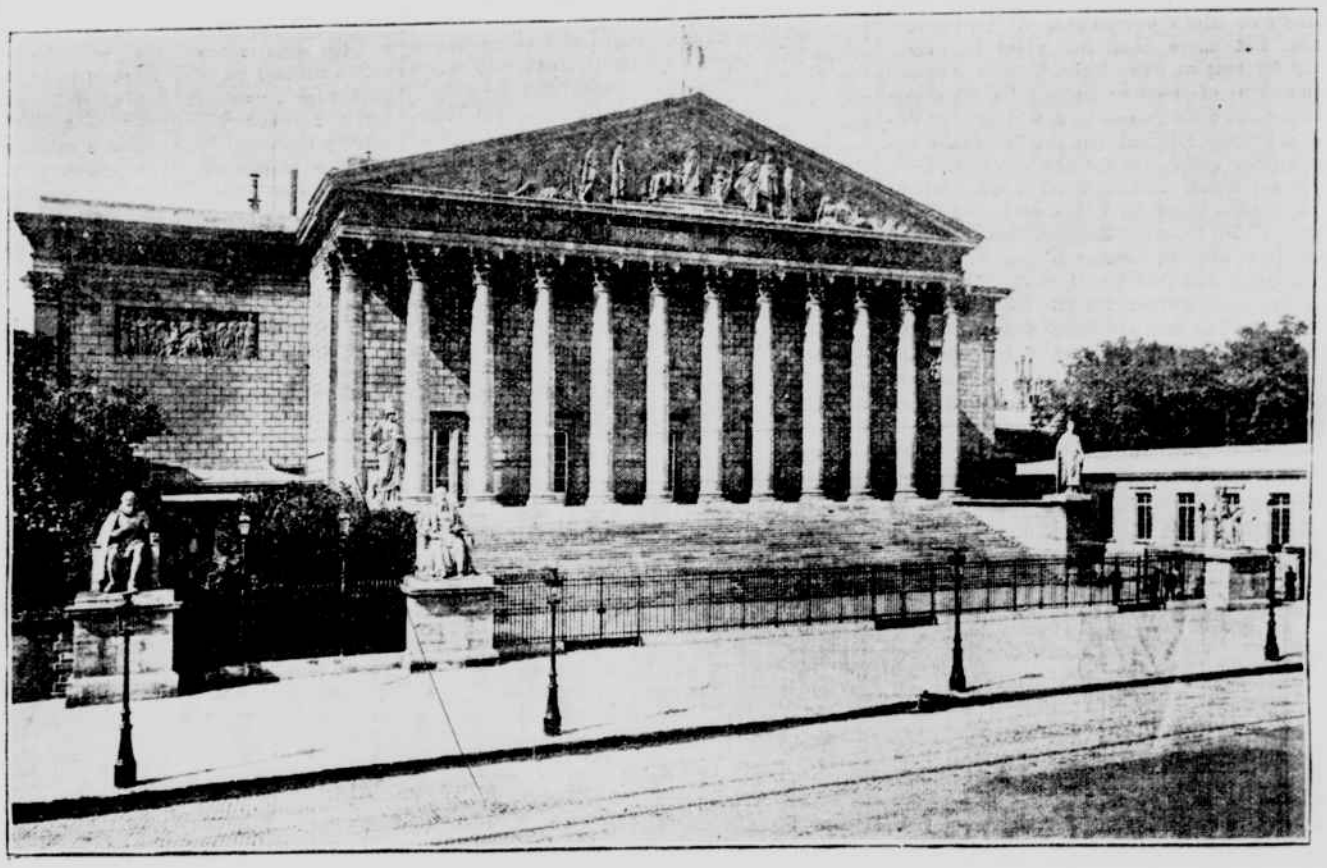
If an American visiting for the first time the French Chamber of Deputies expects to find it like the House of Representatives at Washington he will be disappointed. There are points of contrast rather than of resemblance, and even during the heat of debate the spectator's mind reverts to the past rather than to the present or to the future. Although the existing Chamber of Deputies was the creation of the Constitution of 1875, the rules which regulate its procedure have been transmitted from the Assemblies of the French Revolution, and the system of conducting business by means of commissions has been handed down almost without modification from the meetings of the States General of the old régime.

In 1789 the Third Estate, before it took the name of National Assembly, decided to resolve itself into "bureaux" or committees, in which all matters of interest should be discussed before being submitted to deliberation. It was thus as a relic of the ancient monarchy that Louis XVIII imposed the system on the new Chamber created by the Charter of 1814, and since then it has always been rigidly maintained.

This division of the Legislature into commissions is the keystone of the French system, and all parliamentary procedure depends upon it. The whole body of Deputies is divided mechanically, by means of an ingenious machine invented for the purpose, into eleven "bureaux" or committees, which consist of about thirty-three members each. The committees are again divided into sub-committees, each with its own separate reporter. The "bureaux" make a preliminary examination of a given bill, after which each bureau nominates one or more of its members as its commissioners to support the opinion of its majority in the special commission composed of the eleven nominees of the eleven bureaux, which investigates the bill in question. It is on the decision of the commission thus formed that the fate of a measure practically depends. This method of sifting and reporting on all the work of the Legislature in commissions accounts for the absence of debate in the French Chamber on pending bills. There is one commission—that of "initiative"—which is of especial importance. It consists of twenty-two members (two nominated from each bureau) and examines all bills presented, except government measures, before they are even sent to the special bureaux for preliminary consideration. The object of this commission is to save time and shelve frivolous or improper bills.

Each commission begins operations by choosing a president, a secretary and its reporter. It is an absolute rule of French parliamentary procedure that the work of a commission can be made known to the Chamber only by its report. In the report the commission submits to the Chamber its definite conclusions on a bill considered by it. The report is formed of two parts: the text as adopted by the commission and the arguments to support it. It is also customary to enumerate the objections of the minority of the commissioners. The report thus drawn up is printed and distributed to the Deputies at least twenty-four hours before the bill is placed on the "order of the day" for general discussion. When the day appointed for the debate arrives, the reporter mounts the tribune and speaks in defence of the measure.

This system of commissions takes the place of the party organizations that form an essential feature of parliamentary legislation in the United States and in England. In fact, such keen observers of representative institutions as Mr. James Bryce and Mr. John Bodley both agree that the French system of commissions could never exist in a Parliament where the party system prevails.



THE FRENCH CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES.
Main Entrance, Facing the Quai d'Orsay.

Wherever half a dozen Frenchmen meet together to transact business, nothing can ever be accomplished until the proper functionaries are selected. The solitary chairman of English-speaking assemblies would be deemed inadequate. The functionaries of the Chamber of Deputies cause no little surprise to American observers by their importance and by their number. The President of the Chamber is the third personage in the official hierarchy of the French Republic. He receives a salary of $16,000, and is lodged in the Palais Bourbon. There are four vice-presidents, eight secretaries and three questors. These functionaries form a consultative committee intrusted with the order and "police" of the Chamber during the session, and act in its name should occasion arise during a recess. They have exclusive control of the internal administration of the Chamber, all the ramifications of which are centralized in the hands of the Secretary General. They also appoint and regulate the duties of some fifty subordinate officials attached to the Chamber.

At the Palais Bourbon the President of the Chamber each day makes his entry escorted by a company of infantry detailed from the garrison of Paris. These soldiers, with fixed bayonets, march behind him to the sound of drums, thus reminding the Deputies that armed force is present within the walls to execute discipline in cases of emergency. It is very seldom, however, that military aid has to be invoked by the President of the Chamber. The usual practice in moments of disorder is for the presiding officer simply to put on his hat and declare the sitting suspended. It should also be remembered that the presence of the military guard at the Palais Bourbon was primarily intended not for keeping order within the House, but to prevent the invasion of the Legislature by the Parisian mob.

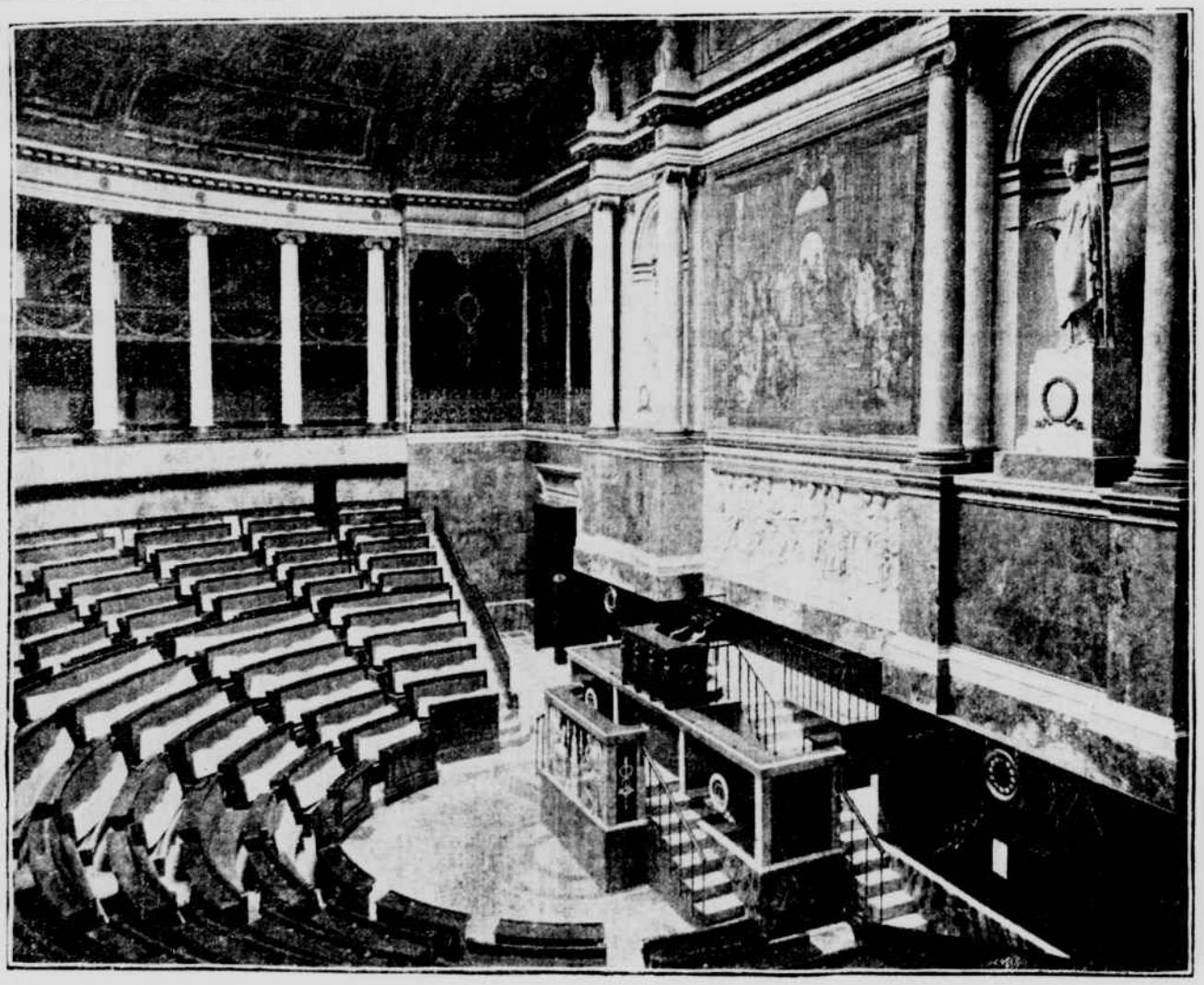
Another feature of the French Chamber which surprises an American visitor is its Greek architecture, which certainly does not favor a respectful attitude of the members toward their President. A stormy sitting of the French Chamber aptly recalls the stirring description of the "séance d'invalidation" in Alphonse Daudet's "Nabab," and the scene presented by Sardou in the last act of "Robespierre" is by no means an exaggeration. These stormy sittings are partly due to the effervescent Gallic character, partly to the incisive and aggressive rhetoric employed by the Deputies. But close observers do not hesitate to say that it is the architecture of the Chamber which is mainly responsible for the noisiest debates. The arrangement, as is pointed out by Mr. Bodley in his treatise on French Parliamentary procedure, resembles that of the theatre of the ancient Greeks. The President and the orator are placed on a double stage, one tribune being superposed on the other, and facing the seats of the Deputies, ranged in semicircular tiers. The President is thus in the direct line of fire of the interruptions which an unpopular debater provokes. Moreover, the position of the orator, face to face with his critics, aggravates the temptation to interrupt. The scene presented to the spectator in the gallery is that of two men—the President and the orator—at bay with an angry public in front of them, equally hostile to both. Sometimes it seems as if the tribune serves as a sort of pillory—such was the case, for instance, when M. Waldeck-Rousseau read from the tribune his ministerial declaration during the tempestuous sitting on June 26, when the Prime Minister stood for five minutes facing the seething Deputies and receiving floods of invective without being able to make himself heard in reply.

The suppression of the tribune for the orator is frequently suggested by the French newspapers after an unusually stormy sitting, or whenever the rebuilding of the Palais Bourbon is discussed. The tribune now in use is that made for the Council of Five Hundred which was dispersed by Bonaparte and his grenadiers at St. Cloud on November 9, 1799. Louis Napoleon suppressed the tribune in 1852, and during the period in which the proceedings of the Corps Legislatif were not made public the members spoke from their places as is the custom in the United States and England. The tribune, which Napoleon caused to be broken to pieces in 1852, was repaired, and in 1867 was replaced in the Chamber as a sign of the advent of a liberal regime. It has remained since 1867 in its present position. The marks of the repairs are still visible.

The most formidable offensive weapon used in the French Chamber is the "interpellation." The interpellation, in its present form, is the outcome of the Third Republic. It is founded upon Ministerial responsibility. It was brought to perfection in the days of Gambetta and when Clémenceau was the chief wrecker of Ministries. Written notice of interpellation must be given beforehand. The Chamber is then turned into a sort of irresponsible tribunal, in which the interpellating member becomes a public prosecutor, and the Ministers assume the positions suggestive of prisoners charged with some criminal offence.

No account of the French Chamber of Deputies would be satisfactory without mention of the mechanical contrivance for constituting the various committees which are the foundation of all French Parliamentary work. There are at present 581 Deputies; 581 small ivory balls are made, each bearing the name of a Deputy. A flat table is provided with eleven hollow pockets, which correspond to the eleven committees, and which hold exactly the same number of ivory balls as there are members of each committee. The flat table is then covered, and by an ingenious mechanism the balls are made to roll into the pockets at hazard. The table is opened; the pockets are examined, and the committees are thus officially and mechanically constituted. In this way the committees are formed purely by chance, and without the influence of patronage or of any political party.

C. I. B.



INTERIOR OF THE FRENCH CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES.